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Perpetrator Responses to Victim Confrontation: DARVO and Victim Self-Blame

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ABSTRACT

Perpetrators of violence often use a strategy of Deny, Attack, and Reverse Victim and Offender (DARVO) to confuse and silence their victims. Although some previous research has examined the individual elements of DARVO, this is the first study to directly examine DARVO as a unitary concept and to investigate how it relates to feelings of self-blame among victims. Subsequently, 138 undergraduate students were asked to report on a time they confronted an individual over a wrong-doing. DARVO was assessed with a new measure constructed for this study. Analyses revealed that: (1) DARVO was commonly used by individuals who were confronted; (2) women were more likely to be exposed to DARVO than men during confrontations; (3) the three components of DARVO were positively correlated, supporting the theoretical construction of DARVO; and (4) higher levels of exposure to DARVO during a confrontation were associated with increased perceptions of self-blame among the confronters. These results provide evidence for the existence of DARVO as a perpetrator strategy and establish a relationship between DARVO exposure and feelings of self-blame. Exploring DARVO aids in understanding how perpetrators are able to enforce victims' silence through the mechanism of self-blame.

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Perpetrators of interpersonal violence thrive when victims are silenced. Most perpetrators never face legal repercussions for their abusive actions (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000; U.S. Department of Justice, 2000) and many victims stay silent about their traumatic experience for extended periods of time or choose never to disclose for multiple reasons, including fear of retaliation and not being believed (Anderson, Martine, Mullen, Romans, & Herbison, 1993; Felson & Paré, 2005; Ferraro, 1997; Flowers, 1996; Mears, Carlson, Holden, & Harris, 2001; Schönbucher, Maier, Mohler-Kuo, Schnyder, & Landolt, 2012; Zoellner et al., 2000). Despite the plethora of research on reasons for victim non-disclosure or delayed disclosure, there has been very little focus on how perpetrators may actively discourage their victims from disclosing. Perpetrator demands for silence may in fact negatively affect

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victims' willingness to disclose interpersonal abuse. Freyd (1997) proposed that perpetrators employ a particular three-part strategy in order to silence victims and escape culpability: deny or minimize the abuse, attack the victim's credibility, and assume a victimized role (i.e., "play the victim"). The elements of this strategy are captured by the acronym DARVO: Deny, Attack, Reverse Victim and Offender. Freyd (1997) conceptually linked these particular responses and suggested that this set of perpetrator reactions to being confronted or held responsible for harmful behavior would produce confusion and non-disclosure on the part of the victim.

Elements of DARVO have been examined, individually or collectively, in multiple studies (e.g., Cameron, 1994; Henning, Jones, & Holdford, 2005). However, despite DARVO's potential as an informative representation of perpetrator behavior and the use of individual components of this concept in research on perpetration, to the best of our knowledge no studies have empirically evaluated the validity of DARVO as a unitary concept. Moreover, empirical research that investigates elements of DARVO (e.g., perpetrators' use of personal attacks against their victims) is largely limited. Of the existing research that does examine concepts described by DARVO, very little investigates the impact that denial, personal attacks, or perpetrators' assumption of a victimized role has on victims. The present study was designed to develop a questionnaire to measure DARVO and to investigate how exposure to it affects victims.

Use of DARVO by perpetrators

Previous research on the cognitive distortions of perpetrators of interpersonal violence suggests a robust foundation for the individual elements of DARVO, with many such studies reporting the frequency of the individual DARVO elements in surveys of offenders. For example, in a large sample of over 1,300 primarily male North American individuals convicted of domestic violence perpetrated against an other-sex partner, denial, minimization, and justification were present in perpetrators' descriptions of their offenses (Henning et al., 2005). A substantial minority of perpetrators (21.5% of men and 17.0% of women) denied that any argument with their partner had taken place at all. The vast majority of perpetrators (82.6% of men and 86.2% of women) responded with at least one form of minimization of the incident, agreeing, for example, that the "situation got blown way out of proportion," or that "the police made [the] incident sound much worse than it actually was." Over half of the perpetrators reported at least one item corresponding to victim blaming, with the most frequently endorsed victim-blaming item implicating that the victim had "a problem with jealousy."

These results are mirrored by a similar study (Lila, Herrero, & Gracia, 2008) that reported that men convicted of intimate partner violence frequently blamed their victims for the assault and portrayed themselves as

the true victims (i.e., attacking and reversing victim and offender). Some of the most highly-endorsed items were "I am here because of the lies and exaggeration of my partner," and "The aggressive character, lack of control, nervousness, or psychological problems of my partner are the reasons why I am in this situation." The perpetrators' frequent agreement with these statements strongly reflects attacks on the victim that label the partner as a liar or as psychologically and behaviorally blame-worthy. Batterers also endorsed additional items that painted themselves as the true victims, such as "I am here because I defended myself from my partner's aggression" and "I am in this situation because I acted in self-defense." Overall, nearly one third of the perpetrators blamed their domestic violence convictions on their victims' characteristics and their victims' alleged aggressiveness, thereby engaging in both attacks on their victims and in reversal of victim and perpetrator roles (Lila et al., 2008).

Research with perpetrators of sexual violence yields similar results. In an interview study with 114 incarcerated rapists, 59% denied ever committing the offense (Scully & Marolla, 1984). Of those who denied the rape, 31% claimed that their victims had "lured" and seduced them, a serious distortion that portrays the rapist as an unsuspecting, passive victim of women's ploys and transforms the victims into the primary aggressors of the assault. In this way, the perpetrators (already in denial of committing any wrong-doing) used victim and offender reversal. A large proportion of the deniers, 69%, minimized the harm of their attacks by saying they believed that their victims relaxed and enjoyed the rape, while 84% of deniers tried to deemphasize their responsibility in the assault by claiming to have been driven to rape by their state of intoxication. Additionally, 78% of the denying rapists attacked the victim's integrity by claiming that their victims were known prostitutes, whores, had children out of wedlock, or had an otherwise supposedly blame-worthy sexual reputation (Scully & Marolla, 1984).

Going beyond examining the individual prevalence of the DARVO components, some researchers have examined how these elements tend to be expressed together. In his study with 75 men with a history of repeated intimate partner violence, Dutton (1986) discovered that men who were high minimizers (i.e., men who described their victims' injuries resulting from the assault as less severe than corresponding victim, hospital, and police reports) were significantly more likely to attribute the cause of the assault to their victims. In other words, men who engaged in minimization—a form of denial—were also likely to portray their victims as the aggressor (i.e., reversal of victim and offender roles). More recent research has replicated this finding, revealing that men charged with intimate partner violence who use high levels of minimization are also more likely to use victim-blaming strategies and describe their behavior as being motivated by self-defense than those who did not engage in as much minimization (Lila et al., 2008).

This evidence for the co-occurrence of minimization, victim-blaming, and even victim-playing supports the idea that the elements of DARVO frequently are used together as a perpetrator tactic.

Effect of DARVO on victims

The research summarized above focused exclusively on samples in which perpetrators are surveyed on their use of denial, attacks targeting their victims' credibility or innocence, and reversal of victim and perpetrator roles. Minimal research has focused on victims' experience of these elements. However, one such study was carried out by Cameron (1994), who conducted the first empirical and longitudinal research on victims confronting their abusers. Drawing from a sample of 72 sex abuse survivors recruited through therapy, Cameron found that 75% of the victims whose perpetrators were still alive and available decided to engage in a confrontation with their abuser. During the confrontations with their perpetrators, 44% of the victims were subject to complete denial by their abusers, 22% were accused of misunderstanding the abuser's conduct, and 44% were told that they were crazy. Further, 22% of the victims heard a partial admission of guilt from their perpetrators, only to have it later retracted and transformed into denial, minimization, or assertions of being misunderstood. After the confrontation, victims in the study reported being disappointed with their abusers' reactions and even doubted their own memories of the abuse. The presence of DARVO in these accounts of victims confronting their perpetrators is clear: through denying, minimizing, attacking the victim, and claiming to be merely misunderstood (possibly with hopes to be cast in a victimized light), perpetrators compelled their victims to doubt their own evaluations of the abuse and promoted confusion surrounding its very occurrence.

The present study

Despite its potential as an informative representation of perpetrator behavior and the apparent frequency with which its components are observed in related research, there are no known studies that empirically evaluate the validity of DARVO as a unitary concept. The present research represents the first analysis to explicitly assess DARVO.

For this study we focused on victims' experiences of DARVO during confrontations with individuals who had mistreated them. Although DARVO was conceptualized as being particularly relevant for instances of interpersonal violence, we believe that it applies more generally to any type of interpersonal betrayal. Because our aim was to develop a self-report measure that could be used across the full scope of behaviors hypothesized to trigger DARVO responses, we chose not to use a sample of individuals who had all

experienced violence. Instead, we used a college student sample and allowed them to choose the experience they would report about, whether violent or not. In doing so, we are able to detect DARVO exposure not only among those who have experienced more serious traumas but also among individuals who have been subjected to milder interpersonal betrayals. Examining many types of confrontations—and not just limiting our sample to confrontations regarding more serious instances of interpersonal violence—more thoroughly demonstrates DARVO's possibly widespread and pernicious nature.

In general, we expected that individuals exposed to higher levels of DARVO during a confrontation would feel more negatively about the confrontation itself and rate it as being a poor experience. Given that DARVO is likely to be perceived as an antagonistic response during a confrontation, it is reasonable to anticipate that individuals would react adversely to this tactic. We also aimed to examine any possible gender differences within the data. The previous (and albeit limited) research does not seem to suggest any gender differences in either use or exposure to denial, victim-blaming, or reversal of victim and offender roles as perpetrator strategies. We, therefore, will be exploring gender as a variable possibly related to both DARVO exposure (i.e., the gender of our participants) and DARVO use (the gender of the person our participants confronted). These expectations regarding emotional valence and gender serve to provide us with basic—but important—information about some of the characteristics of DARVO, such as who experiences and uses DARVO and how this tactic is received. For instance, if DARVO is received neutrally then perhaps its impact on confronters is not as great as anticipated.

We were also interested in how denial, personal attacks, and reversal of victim and offender roles directly relate to one another when used by perpetrators during a confrontation. Based on previous research finding that perpetrators who minimize the severity of their actions are also more likely to describe their victims as blame-worthy (Dutton, 1986; Lila et al., 2008), we expected that the individual elements of DARVO would be positively correlated. In other words, individuals who are exposed to perpetrator denial during a confrontation are also likely to be subject to personal attacks and be accused of being the wrong-doer by the individual they are confronting. This association is important for supporting the idea that the conceptual components of DARVO co-occur; if we find this to be the case, then we can be more confident about the legitimacy of DARVO as a unitary concept.

Along with exploring relationships among the individual DARVO elements, we intended to examine how DARVO may relate to expressions of apologies or remorse during the confrontations. Cameron (1994) discovered that individuals confronted by her participants would sometimes convey responsibility for their abusive behavior before responding with DARVO-

like tactics. Since it is likely such phrases may be used in conjunction with DARVO and are therefore important to assess, we expected apology and responsibility-assuming phrases to be used alongside DARVO. However, given that this is the first study to investigate DARVO, this is a tentative hypothesis.

A further goal of the present study was to investigate how DARVO relates to feelings of self-blame in victims. Because DARVO was first proposed as a means of causing confusion among victims (confusion regarding the culpability of the perpetrator), examining self-blame among those who have been exposed to DARVO would provide insight into the way in which it is thought to excuse or diminish the actions of perpetrators by instilling a sense of blameworthiness within the victims. Therefore, we expect that exposure to DARVO will be positively related to feelings of self-blame in respondents.

Method

Participants

Participants were 149 undergraduate students attending a large, public northwestern university. Nine participants were excluded due to incomplete data. Two additional participants were excluded because they did not report about a time that they confronted someone else (one person reported about a time he or she was confronted and a second person reported a "self" confrontation). Thus, the final sample comprised 138 people: 33 men (23.9%), 104 women (75.4%), and one individual who did not identify as male or female. On average, the participants were 19.54 years old ($SD = 2.26$) with a range of ages spanning from 18 to 33 years. The sample had a minority of LGBTQ participants (5.1%). Most participants (66.7%) identified as White; the remaining participants identified as Asian (15.9%), Hispanic (7.2%), Other (5.1%), Black (1.4%), and Native American, Alaskan, or Pacific Islander (1.4%). Another 2.2% of the sample declined to indicate their racial identity.

Participants were recruited through the university's human participant pool website; participation in this study partially fulfilled a requirement for their introductory psychology course. At the time they signed up for the study, participants were only aware that the study was an anonymous online survey. The exact content of the survey was made available only after students had selected to participate in the study; this element of the procedure was intended to minimize self-selection bias.

After signing up to participate in the study, students were given the option of completing the survey within one week or declining participation altogether. No one who initially selected the study declined participation after learning about the nature of the survey's content provided by the informed consent document displayed at the beginning of the survey; furthermore, all

participants completed the survey within 24 hours of signing up for the study. After completing the survey, participants were presented with a debriefing form detailing the motivation for the study. Despite being allowed to decline participation at any point during the study, all participants finished the survey. Research procedures used for this study were approved by the university's institutional review board.

Materials

Materials were presented to all participants in a fixed order. They included questions about a time that the participant confronted another person about a wrong-doing, DARVO responses they received, and self-blame. Additional survey instruments were also administered; they were not analyzed for the present report.

Confrontation items

In order to obtain information about the general nature of the confrontations participants had experienced, we created several items regarding the characteristics of the confrontation and individuals' perceived experience of the event. These items are intended to accompany the DARVO measure discussed below. Participants were first asked to provide general information regarding "a time when you confronted someone who wronged you in some way" by responding to an open-ended prompt asking to describe the incident that provoked the confrontation in their own words. Additionally, respondents were asked to indicate their relationship with the person confronted by selecting from a list of options (e.g., "Parent or guardian," "Sibling," "Friend or acquaintance"). Participants were also asked about their feelings regarding the confrontation (both when it occurred and at the time of the survey) by selecting from a checklist of nine specific emotions ("Negative," "Positive," "Neutral," "Confused," "Fear," "Shame," "Betrayed," "Happy," and "Angry"). Participants were able to select multiple emotions from the list and were also able to choose "I don't know" and "Other" as options. Additionally, participants were asked to rate how well they believed the confrontation went on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from "Not well at all" to "Very well."

DARVO Questionnaire

A 72-item questionnaire to measure DARVO was developed for the present study (see Table 1 for a complete list of DARVO items). As described above, participants were instructed to recall a specific time when they confronted someone over a wrong-doing, which is referred to throughout the questionnaire as "the incident." Participants were asked to indicate on a 5-point Likert scale (ranging from 1 = "Not at all like this" to 5 = "Almost exactly like this") whether the individual they confronted had said something similar

Table 1. DARVO questionnaire items.

Deny	*M* (*SD*)	Attack	*M* (*SD*)	Reverse	*M* (*SD*)
I don't remember it happening at all	2.11 (1.35)	*No one would believe you if you said anything about it*	1.48 (.95)	*I am the one who suffered the most from it*	2.09 (1.37)
I was just under stress	2.19 (1.40)	*You are just whining about it*	2.21 (1.25)	*You really hurt me with your actions*	1.85 (1.23)
It wasn't as bad as you're making it sound	2.32 (1.29)	*You regret what you did and now you're blaming me*	1.54 (1.03)	*You should be apologizing to me*	2.06 (1.37)
It's not worth talking about	1.99 (1.23)	*You're just trying to make me look bad*	2.16 (1.35)	*Even though you did this to me, I'm still going to try to be good to you*	1.51 (1.04)
Whatever you're saying happened wasn't my fault	1.81 (1.16)	*You're just trying to manipulate me*	1.60 (1.05)	*I am still trying to forgive you for what happened*	1.47 (.99)
It could have been a lot worse	1.84 (1.20)	*You're imagining things*	1.77 (1.13)	*You're the one who provoked me*	1.49 (.97)
Nothing bad happened	1.79 (1.11)	*You're just being hypersensitive about it*	2.29 (1.32)	*You're bullying me*	1.41 (.83)
I don't know what you're talking about	1.86 (1.21)	*You're acting crazy*	2.01 (1.30)	*Why are you punishing me?*	1.49 (1.01)
You are just exaggerating how bad it was	1.87 (1.15)	*You're acting delusional*	1.29 (.75)	*You're not being fair to me*	1.96 (1.24)
That never happened	1.60 (1.11)	*You're so unstable*	1.36 (.87)	*I'm the real victim here*	1.88 (1.35)
I am not responsible for what happened	1.65 (1.01)	*Why should I trust anything you say?*	1.49 (1.03)	*You treated me worse than I ever treated you*	1.58 (1.09)
I didn't do anything wrong	2.09 (1.40)	*You're making it up for attention*	1.39 (.94)	*You pushed me too far*	1.35 (.84)
I was just drunk	1.49 (1.05)	*You've always been a failure*	1.24 (.79)	*Everyone will think I'm a terrible person because of your lies*	1.36 (.88)
I would never do something like that	1.42 (.84)	*Everyone knows you're dysfunctional anyway*	1.31 (.81)	*You're humiliating me*	1.41 (1.00)
It wasn't that big of a deal	2.08 (1.22)	*You're a liar*	1.59 (1.12)	*You hurt my feelings when you accuse me of that*	1.72 (1.13)
It was just a misunderstanding	1.90 (1.15)	*If you weren't acting the way you were, this wouldn't have ever happened*	1.73 (1.15)		
Why are you attacking me	1.99 (1.30)				
You're blowing it out of proportion	2.25 (1.25)	*You need help*	1.49 (1.01)	*I've been nothing but good to you, why are you treating me like this?*	1.69 (1.09)
You're remembering it incorrectly	1.57 (1.02)	*What happened was your fault*	1.73 (1.23)	*I can't believe you're trying to make this my fault*	1.74 (1.18)

to the phrases presented on the questionnaire. Each of the three elements of DARVO was represented by 18 items; the remaining 18 items were part of the apology subscale. The DARVO items used on the questionnaire were derived largely from expressions commonly associated with denial, victim-blaming, and assuming a victimized role. Many of the items were sourced from discussions of victim/abuser confrontations on internet forums for sexual assault and abuse survivors. For each sub-scale, scores reported below represent the average of the 18 items.

Denial subscale. Denial items reject the seriousness or harmfulness of a wrong-doing (minimization) or reject the existence of or responsibility for the wrong-doing altogether. Examples include, "I don't know what you are talking about," "It could have been a lot worse," and "I am not responsible for what happened." Cronbach's alpha for the denial subscale was .85 for men and .90 for women.

Attack subscale. Attack items undermine the credibility and judgement of the confronter. Example items include: "You're making [the incident] up for attention," "You're acting crazy," and "You're just being hypersensitive about it." Cronbach's alpha for the attack subscale was .89 for men and .91 for women.

Reverse subscale. Items in this subscale reverse the victim and offender role, describing the offender as the true victim, and/or the victim as having acted even worse than the offender. Example items include: "I can't believe you're trying to make this my fault," "You really hurt me with your actions," and "You treated me worse than I ever treated you." Cronbach's alpha for this subscale was .91 for men and .92 for women.

Apology subscale. In addition to the items relating directly to DARVO, an additional 18 items representing apologies were also included on the questionnaire. These items were designed to capture responses characterized by remorse, guilt, or admission of responsibility. Example items include "What happened was my fault" and "I apologize for what happened." Cronbach's alpha for men was .98 and .97 for women.

Self-blame

A modified version of a 5-item victim-blame attribution measure (Yamawaki, Ostenson, & Brown, 2009) was used to evaluate participants' self-blame for the incident that initially provoked the confrontation. This measure had adequate to good internal consistency among both Japanese (α = .82) and American (α = .73) samples (Yamawaki et al., 2009). Originally, the victim-blame attribution measure assessed participants' perception of blame

ascribed to an individual described in a vignette. Changes to the wording of the items were made in order to accommodate self-reported feelings of blame (i.e., "Marci" in the original items was replaced with "I feel I . . ."), creating the following five items: "I feel I had some faults in this incident," "I feel I provoked this incident," "I feel I had some responsibility for creating this situation," "I feel I should be blamed for this incident," and "I feel I should be punished for this incident." As in the original measure, participants in the present study were asked to rate their agreement with these statements on a 7-point Likert scale; however, unlike the measure created by Yamawaki and colleages, participants rated their agreement for their feelings of self-blame at the time of the confrontation. Cronbach's alpha values for the items describing self-blame at the time of the confrontation ($\alpha = .80$) were acceptable.

Data analysis

Descriptive statistics were computed for the variables describing the characteristics of the individual confronted, for feelings about the confrontation, and for the DARVO measure. We then conducted a Pearson correlation coefficient to examine the relationship between the negative feelings about the confrontation and DARVO exposure; further, an independent-samples *t* test was done to compare the average DARVO exposure between those who rated their confrontations as going well to those who rated their confrontations as not going well. Pearson correlation coefficients were then calculated to assess the relationship between the DARVO measure subscales and also between DARVO and individuals' feelings of self-blame. Finally, a series of independent-samples *t* tests were computed to test for differences in DARVO exposure and use between genders.

Results

Confrontations

Approximately half of the participants reported confronting a friend or acquaintance; a smaller proportion (15.2%) reported confronting a romantic partner; and even fewer participants confronted a parent or guardian (10.9%), sibling, (5.8%), or coworker or peer (3.6%). Only three participants confronted a teacher, coach, or other professional, while two individuals from our sample confronted a stranger. The gender of the individuals confronted was revealed to be fairly evenly split, with 46.3% of participants confronting a male wrong-doer and 52.2% confronting a female wrong-doer (four participants elected to not disclose the gender of the person they confronted). Moreover, 110 participants (79.7%) elected to describe the

confrontation in their own words and provided enough detail to enable us to categorize the nature of the confrontation. Of these individuals, 20 described romantic relationship betrayals such as being cheated on in a relationship. Approximately 86 participants in our sample had confronted someone over perceived mistreatment or various social transgressions. Examples from this category include being excluded or ignored by friends, having a secret betrayed by a close friend or family member, and being disrespected or mistreated by acquaintances. Only four participants indicated that they had confronted another person over instances of interpersonal abuse: two women in our sample described confronting a male individual over sexual assault while another two female participants noted they had confronted their fathers over abuse.

Feelings about the confrontation

Participants were asked to report the feelings regarding the confrontation that they held at two time points: (1) at the time of the confrontation, and (2) at the time of the survey. Participants' feelings about the confrontation at the time it occurred were largely negative. Nearly half (50.7%) of participants reported that around the time of the confrontation they felt angry, while 47.1% indicated that they felt "Negative" about the confrontation (note that the participants could endorse more than one item in describing how they felt about the confrontation). Approximately 12% of participants reported feeling "Positive" about the confrontation at the time it happened. However, negative feelings about the confrontation were less common when participants were asked to indicate how they *currently* felt about the confrontation —for example, only 20% of participants acknowledged they felt "Angry" and 21.7% felt "Negative" about the confrontation at the time of the study. Conversely, feeling "Positive" about the confrontation was more common at the time of the study, with approximately 26.1% of participants selecting this option.

Feelings about the confrontation and DARVO

The three DARVO subscales (i.e., all items except for the 18 apology items) were averaged to create a total DARVO score for each participant. A bivariate correlation revealed that DARVO exposure during a confrontation was significantly related to the number of negative-valence emotions felt at the time of the confrontation (i.e., "Negative," "Betrayed," "Angry," "Confused," "Shame," and "Fear") such that hearing more DARVO phrases was associated with an increase in the number of negative emotions endorsed, $r = .245$, $p = .005$. Similarly, participants who reported that they felt the confrontation did not go well (i.e., those who reported that the confrontation either went "Not well" or "Not well at all") were found to have significantly more DARVO exposure ($M = 1.87$, $SD = .62$) than participants who indicated that they believed their confrontation went

positively ($M = 1.52$, $SD = .64$), $t(130) = 3.14$, $p = .002$. However, DARVO exposure was not significantly related to participants' number of *current* negative emotions concerning the confrontation, $r = .116$, $p = .187$.

DARVO Questionnaire

The vast majority of participants ($N = 134$, 97.10%) reported exposure to DARVO during a confrontation; only four participants had been exposed to no DARVO-like phrases. All three types of DARVO phrases were highly endorsed. For each type, over 80% of participants had heard something "at least somewhat like" one of the questionnaire items. Exposure to denial phrases was especially frequent, with 96.38% ($N = 133$) of respondents indicating that they had heard at least one statement of denial or minimization ($M = 1.86$, $SD = .71$) that was "at least somewhat like" a denial item. Approximately 88% of participants ($N = 121$) were exposed to at least one personal attack ($M = 1.62$, $SD = .66$) and about 80% of our sample ($N = 110$) heard the individual they confronted assume a victimized role ($M = 1.64$, $SD = .73$).

Altogether, 71.7% ($N = 99$) of participants indicated that they heard at least one phrase each (endorsed at the "somewhat like this" level and higher) from all three components of DARVO. A Pearson product-movement correlation coefficient revealed that the individual elements in DARVO were significantly and positively correlated; i.e., denial scores were correlated with attack ($r = .788$, $p < .001$) and reverse ($r = .708$, $p < .001$) scores and attack and reverse scores were correlated with each other ($r = .826$, $p < .001$). However, the apology subscale was not significantly correlated with any of the individual DARVO subscales (all rs < 0.09 and all ps ≥ 0.30), indicating that hearing apologies and statements of regret or guilt during a confrontation was not associated with exposure to DARVO phrases.

DARVO and gender

Means for DARVO, apology, and self-blame items by gender are reported in Table 2. Exposure to DARVO during a confrontation differed significantly by gender. Women ($M = 1.78$, $SD = .67$) were more

Table 2. Means of DARVO and self-blame scores.

	Men	Women	Total
DARVO total*	1.44 (.47)	1.78 (.67)	1.28 (.49)
Deny*	1.63 (.53)	1.93 (.75)	1.86 (.71)
Attack*	1.39 (.49)	1.68 (.68)	1.62 (.69)
Reverse*	1.32 (.50)	1.73 (.76)	1.64 (.73)
Apologies	1.85 (1.11)	1.94 (1.19)	1.93 (1.06)
Self-blame	2.39 (1.16)	2.47 (1.32)	2.47 (1.29)

*Indicates a significant difference between genders at the .05 level.

likely to have been subject to expressions of DARVO than were men (M = 1.44, SD = .47), $t(71.13) = -3.15$, $p = .002$. Looking at the individual DARVO subscales, women reported higher exposure to denial (M = 1.93, SD = .75) than did men (M = 1.62, SD = .53), $t(68.98) = -2.490$, $p = .015$. Similarly, women had been subject to more personal attacks (M = 1.68, SD = .68) than had men (M = 1.39, SD = .49), $t(68.90) = -2.69$, $p = .009$. Women also had higher exposure to the reverse-victim-and-offender items (M = 1.73, SD = .76) than did men (M = 1.32, SD = .50), $t(76.43) = -3.51$, $p = .001$. However, there was no significant difference between men (M = 1.85, SD = 1.12) and women (M = 1.94, SD = 1.04) in exposure to endorsement of apology items, $t(130) = -0.410$, $p = .68$.

Furthermore, we examined whether DARVO use varied by gender (i.e., whether women or men were more likely to use DARVO during the confrontations). We found no significant difference between the men (M = 1.69, SD = .69) and women (M = 1.73, SD = .60) confronted by our sample in DARVO usage, $t(128) = -.363$, $p = .717$. Similarly, apologies were found to be expressed at approximately equal levels by men (M = 1.96, SD = 1.12) and women (M = 1.89, SD = 1.00) towards the participants, $t(129) = .393$, $p = .695$.

DARVO and self-blame

Pearson product-moment correlations between DARVO and self-blame were computed (see Table 3). Total DARVO scores were positively correlated with self-blame ratings at the time of the confrontation ($r = .312$, $p < .001$). In other words, individuals who had been exposed to higher levels of DARVO during a confrontation also tended to report more feelings of self-blame around the time that the confrontation occurred. Furthermore, the individual subscales of DARVO were correlated with self-blame. However, exposure to apologies during the confrontation was not significantly correlated with self-blame during the time of the confrontation ($r = -.021$, $p = .809$).

Discussion

This study sought to examine the relationship among the individual elements of DARVO as well as the relationship between DARVO and feelings of self-

Table 3. Pearson correlation coefficient table for DARVO subscales and self-blame.

	Self-blame
Deny	.253**
Attack	.321**
Reverse	.287***
Total DARVO	.312**
Apologize	−.02

**p < .01; ***p < .001.

blame among individuals who had engaged in a confrontation over a wrongdoing. We expected that the individuals our participants confronted would use denial, personal attacks, and victim-playing together during the confrontation. Based on Freyd's initial proposal of DARVO's function (i.e., to redirect blame onto the confronter and cause confusion), we also hypothesized that exposure to DARVO would be related to more feelings of self-blame among our participants.

The results show that DARVO was indeed commonly experienced by individuals who confronted another person over a wide variety of wrongdoings, ranging from milder social indiscretions between acquaintances to more severe interpersonal abuses. We also discovered that DARVO exposure was related to the number of participants' negative emotions felt about the confrontation when it occurred; individuals who rated their confrontations as not going well were exposed to significantly more DARVO than those who rated their confrontations as going at least somewhat well. Here, we see that exposure to higher rates of DARVO was significantly related to people's feelings about a confrontation such that hearing more DARVO was a markedly more negative experience. In general, negative social interactions have been found to be associated with poor outcomes relating to physical and psychological health (Cohen, 2004; Lincoln, 2000). Although beyond the scope of the current study, the finding that exposure to DARVO is related to more negative appraisals suggests that social interactions in which this strategy is employed may too be associated with consequences for individuals' well-being.

DARVO was experienced disproportionately by women but apologies were heard by men and women at comparable rates. More specifically, women reported hearing more denial and minimization surrounding the wrongdoing, more personal attacks (including blame for the wrongdoing), and more perpetrator/victim role reversal. Since previous research has largely not examined perpetrator denial, minimization, victim-blaming, and victim-playing in terms of gender, our findings are the first to support the idea that such DARVO expressions are used by perpetrators of wrong-doing differently depending on the confronters' gender. These results may be due, in part, by the perception of women as being more easily influenced and submissive (Broverman, Broverman, Clarkson, Rosenkrantz, & Vogel, 1970; Eagly & Wood, 1982) and therefore perceived as more susceptible to DARVO expressions by the individual confronted. Research also has described how men tend to seek out apparently submissive women for exploitation (Richards, Rollerson, & Phillips, 1991), a finding that suggests individuals' perception of women as submissive or easily influenced may lead to purposeful use of DARVO on female confronters.

However, DARVO use by the individual confronted did not vary significantly by gender, revealing that men and women were just as likely to use

DARVO. The latter finding reflects research that has found that male and female perpetrators of domestic violence use denial and minimization at approximately equal rates (Henning et al., 2005). Yet this does not appear to be a stable finding across all studies: in a sample of undergraduate students, Scott and Straus (2007) found that men blamed their romantic partners for relationship difficulties at a higher rate than did women. Men also exhibited more denial surrounding these relationship difficulties, but men and women exhibited approximately equal levels of minimization. Our results provide additional evidence revealing how men and women may use denial, victim-blaming, and victim-playing at similar rates when confronted with a wrong-doing.

Analyses confirmed that the elements of DARVO are likely to be used in concert by the perpetrator of wrong-doing. In other words, denial, victim-blaming, and playing the victim were frequently expressed conjointly by the perpetrator of wrong-doing during confrontations. Moreover, these DARVO expressions were unrelated to expressions of apologies. As with previous research finding that perpetrators of interpersonal violence who deny or minimize their behavior are more likely to engage in victim-blaming and to assume a victimized role (Scott & Straus, 2007), these results replicate similar findings and support the notion that the elements in DARVO are highly likely to appear together.

Supporting Freyd's (1997) concept that DARVO functions to instill confusion (and thereby discourage victims from speaking about their abusive experiences), our data revealed an important link between DARVO exposure and confronters' feelings of self-blame: the more DARVO an individual was exposed to during a confrontation, the more likely the confronter was to experience self-blame regarding the incident that provoked the confrontation. However, whereas increased levels of exposure to denial, victim blaming, and playing the victim were found to be associated with greater feelings of self-blame, higher exposure to apology phrases was not related to participants' self-blame.

DARVO's relationship with increased levels of self-blame is concerning given the correlates of self-blame found by previous studies. Research has found that self-blame in survivors of interpersonal abuse is associated with more psychological distress (Frazier, 2003; Frazier, Berman, & Steward, 2002), maladaptive coping, and posttraumatic stress disorder symptoms (Filipas & Ullman, 2006; Ullman, Filipas, Townsend, & Starzynski, 2007). Self-blame has also been found to be associated with delayed disclosure or silence surrounding abuse (Ahrens, 2006; Kellogg & Hoffman, 1997; Ullman, 2007).

The detected relationship between DARVO and self-blame within our particular sample is noteworthy because the majority of our participants chose to describe a confrontation regarding relatively minor forms of

relationship betrayal (e.g., being let down by a friend or being cheated on by a boyfriend or girlfriend). This suggests that the link between DARVO and self-blame is salient, even when the wrong-doing that provoked the confrontation is not highly traumatic. Although our sample did contain a few confrontations regarding serious interpersonal abuse, the number of such cases was not large enough to conduct formal analyses examining whether or not the relationship between DARVO and self-blame becomes markedly stronger as the nature of the confrontations becomes more severe. However, it might be possible that the consequences of DARVO become more pronounced as the nature of the confrontations increases in severity (e.g., interpersonal abuse). In light of this, we suspect that feelings of self-blame—and the ramifications associated with self-blame among victims—might be even more salient among individuals exposed to DARVO during confrontations over more serious abuse.

Simply having an awareness of DARVO and its use by perpetrators may serve to mitigate some of the negative effects associated with DARVO, particularly the increased sense of self-blame in victims. For individuals who wish to confront their abusers, knowing about the occurrence of DARVO may better prepare them for the possibly undesirable and hostile response they might receive during the confrontation. Such preparation would equip victims with the knowledge that their abusers may try to simultaneously make the confronters feel responsible for the abuse, deny that any abuse happened, and employ personal attacks. Readying oneself for the possibility of being subject to these confusing and harmful responses may lessen DARVO's impact and allow victims, rather than feeling disoriented after a confrontation, to make sense of their abuser's reaction. In this way, being cognizant of DARVO may allow victims to thwart their abuser's attempts to distort the victim's own narrative of the abuse, thereby empowering victims of interpersonal violence who choose to confront their abusers.

Although the present study did find an important and informative relationship between DARVO and self-blame, our study is limited by the correlational nature of the data. While this prevents us from making causal conclusions, the current research still presents valuable research as it is the first to not only empirically substantiate Freyd's (1997) concept of DARVO, but it also reveals a meaningful relationship between DARVO exposure and self-blame.

A second limitation of the study arises from the fact that, by relying on self-reporting by our participants, we were unable to verify the guilt of the wrong-doers (and, conversely, the guiltlessness of the confronters) regarding the "wrong-doing" described by participants. This stands in contrast with the previous research on perpetrator denial and victim-blaming in which samples of convicted—thus confirmed guilty—individuals were used. In our own research, however, we are unable to assert whether the DARVO responses

reported by our participants reflect authentic perpetrator distortions or instead reactions to wrongful accusations. Yet, despite our inability to verify the guiltiness of the individuals confronted by our participants, we still were able to replicate the previous research revealing perpetrators' use of DARVO-like responses when asked to report on their abusive behavior.

Additional limitations pertain to the characteristics of the sample, which was comprised entirely of undergraduate college students. For instance, the majority of participants were female; because of this, it is possible that the gender distribution in our sample may have impacted the results. However, given the limited research on DARVO in general, we cannot decisively say, for example, whether women are more likely to be attuned to and thereby more sensitive to DARVO than men, or vice versa. Further research is needed to more fully explore the relationship between gender and DARVO. Another limitation regarding the sample was that relatively few participants reported a confrontation about physical abuse or other violent behavior. Because DARVO responses are hypothesized to be especially prevalent among perpetrators of interpersonal violence, it will be important to replicate these findings in other samples, including survivors of domestic violence and childhood sexual abuse.

Further, we did not ask participants to indicate when the confrontations they reported on took place; it is then plausible that some participants chose to describe a confrontation that occurred years before taking part in the study, while for others the length of time between the confrontation and participation could have been much shorter. Because of this, it is possible that participants who confronted someone more recently may more clearly remember the confrontation than others. This could have impacted the data such that participants were less likely to indicate that they had heard DARVO phrases, thereby leading to underreports of DARVO exposure.

Future studies on DARVO can expand our knowledge in other ways as well. For example, examining DARVO using an experimental design would allow causal conclusions to be drawn regarding self-blame and DARVO. Apart from improving upon the methods of the current study, further research would also serve well to explicitly investigate a relationship between DARVO and its potentially silencing effects on victims. Although the discovery of a link between DARVO exposure and self-blame is notable in and of itself, we do not know whether this self-blame directly contributes to non-disclosure among victims. The results of a study examining this potentially causal relationship would provide a much more substantial understanding of DARVO and its consequences.

Additional research on this topic could also experimentally test whether DARVO is indicative of guilt. Although previous studies have indeed shown that individuals convicted of crimes of interpersonal violence do exhibit

DARVO responses, we cannot yet conclude that DARVO is exclusive to individuals who have committed a wrong-doing or offense. An experimental study could discern whether DARVO is more likely to be used by individuals guilty of wrong-doing than by those who have not engaged in blameworthy behavior.

In our study examining the concept of DARVO, we provided evidence supporting both its use by perpetrators during confrontations and its relationship with self-blame. Although based on correlational data, our finding that exposure to DARVO-like phrases during a confrontation was linked to more feelings of self-blame for the victim should bring attention to the possible harmful effects of DARVO on victims.

Disclosure of interest

This research is based on a portion of Sarah Harsey's master's thesis, submitted to the University of Oregon. The authors declare that they have no conflicts to report.

Ethical standards and informed consent

All procedures followed were in accordance with the ethical standards of the responsible committee on human experimentation [institutional and national] and with the Helsinki Declaration of 1975, as revised in 2000. Informed consent was obtained from all patients for being included in the study.

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